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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the literature selection and evaluation practices of preservice teachers, investigating trends in choosing and acquiring literature and factors affecting the literature's appeal. Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in a language arts course for elementary school majors who completed a survey and attached it to a lesson plan and a reflection used that day. The survey asked why they picked the literature in their lesson plans, where they got it, what they liked most and least about it, and whether they would use it again. Students completed the survey three times during the term. Four students completed interviews regarding why they chose the literature, what factors appealed to them, how they would describe the selection process, how they evaluated literature, and what factors would discourage them from using literature. Overall, participants chose literature for many reasons, which varied as students were increasingly exposed to children's literature and the need for its use in class. There was a shift from the importance of current teaching topic and personal experience in literature selection to a more broad-based range of selection reasons from the first to the third survey. Illustrations were an important factor in the selection process, as were book and award lists. Over half of the literature selections came from the library. (SM)

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Investigating Preservice Teachers' Literature Selection Process

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Abstract

Literature selection and evaluation have become integral parts of the teaching process for many educators. Though research has been done in the area of literature selection, the current awareness of multiculturalism and increased use of tradebooks in the classroom necessitates further research into selection trends. This paper delves into the selection and evaluation practices of a class of preservice teachers in Mississippi to look for trends in choosing literature, acquiring literature for classroom use, and factors which affect the appeal/dislike of literature.

Investigating Preservice Teachers' Literature Selection Process

Traditionally teachers have relied upon textbooks to provide the framework for reading material in the classroom. However, researchers such as Eldredge and Butterfield (1986) have influenced the change from traditional basals with the results of their research showing the importance of literature based instruction. After studying the effects of a literature based program, Zarrillo (1989) also mentions the importance of researchers pursuing program designs for literature based reading. One of the aspects of this design should be literature selection.

Current trends in education have led toward the use of tradebooks in the classroom. Children are challenged by literature which piques their interest and builds on existing schema. Practical problems have arisen from this approach, selection of literature for the classroom has often become a decision left up to the individual teacher. These teachers depend upon experience to assist with these choices. Preservice teachers , who have little or no classroom experience, are also selecting literature in preparation of entering into the classroom.

Currently, research presents a variety of suggestions for the evaluation of literature. Most research ties the evaluation process directly to the selection process. Au and Scheu (1989) point out " ...the starting point in teaching with novels is the text itself. Teachers carefully select novels they feel will challenge and involve their students" (p. 105). Research has shown that teachers evaluate literature in the selection process and the two have an integral inseparable connection. Jipson and Paley (1991) point out

> " ...books are not ideologically neutral objects; that is, they both reflect and convey certain sets of sociocultural values, beliefs, and attitudes to their readers.

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These educators also believe that because of this, book choice is a weighted procedure, since the very process of choosing certain literary works for classroom use involves the simultaneous exclusion of others" (p.148).

Historical Aspect of Literature Selection Research

Luke, Cooke, and Luke (1986) noted in their study of student teachers in Australia that literature selections by these student teachers tended to be by and about male figures. This perceived gender bias was most evident among 18 to 20 year old student teachers. Mature student teachers (many in Luke, Cooke, and Luke's study were also raising female children) tended to be more consciously aware of gender and ethnicity in their selection.

Jipson and Paley's (1991) research focused on elementary teachers from three states Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Oregon. Their study also found that male authors were more heavily favored in the subjects literature selections. Additionally, virtually none of the authors were ethnic minorities. Main characters in the books suffered close to the same fate with most human characters being male and few of ethnic descent.

A 1998 study by Wollman-Bonilla identified specific teacher criteria for rejecting literature. Preservice teacher reactions to literature were documented and classified. She found three major reasons texts were found to be inappropriate by the preservice teachers:

1. ... a text is inappropriate for children because it might frighten or corrupt them by introducing them to things they don't or shouldn't know about;
2. that a text is inappropriate for children because it fails to represent dominant social values or myths;

3. .... that a text is inappropriate for children because it identifies racism or sexism as a social problem. (p. 289)

Differing Viewpoints in the Research

While Jipson and Paley (1991) supported Luke, Cooke, and Luke's (1986) assertions that teachers' bias are unconscious unexamined. Wollman-Bonilla posits that "teachers are quite conscious of their criteria for text rejections, at least when class discussion brings their own beliefs to the fore" (p. 292). She also disagrees with Jipson and Payley's assertion that confrontation of the teacher bias will allow the teacher to overcome them. Wollman-Bonilla notes the extensive class discussions and the unwavering opinions expressed in spite of opposing perspectives.

Focus

The literature selection and evaluation have become integral parts of the teaching process for many educators. Though research has been done in the area of literature selection, the current awareness of multiculturalism and increased use of tradebooks in the classroom necessitates further research into selection trends. This paper delves into the selection and evaluation practices of a class of preservice teachers in Mississippi to look for continuations of trends noted in previous literature selection research.

Method

Participants. Participants were 16 undergraduate students (15 female and 1 male) ranging in age from 19 to 45. The racial makeup of the class consisted to two African Americans and 14 Caucasian students. They were enrolled in a junior level language arts course designed for elementary school majors in a large public university in Mississippi. The study was done as part of the requirements for reflection on the lesson plans the

participants were required to complete for the course. Prior to the surveys and interviews, information including age, sex, race, and college major were collected.

Data Collection. For the surveys, the participants filled out a 5 question survey and attached it to a lesson plan and reflection taught that day. The survey questions (see Appendix A) were formulated based on the questions asked by Wollman-Bonilla (1998), Jipson and Paley (1991), Zarrillo (1989), and Luke, Cooke, and Luke (1986). The survey was taken three times during the course of the semester term with each lesson plan participants taught to get a broader view of individual participant selections. Participants were instructed to fill out a survey as part of their reflective portion of their lesson plan assignments. Each of the students was given a copy of the survey and instructed to use a code for identification by the researcher. Students then filled out the survey (Appendix 1) after having used the literature selection in the classroom that morning.

Four participants were also interviewed by the researcher. Participants for the student interviews were selected by the researcher based on the researcher's view of their ability to communicate effectively and their willingness to be brutally honest. Five questions were chosen to guide the 15 minute interview process, which was based loosely on points from Jipson and Paley (1991) and Zarrillo (1989).

1. Why do you choose a piece of literature?
2. What factor appeals most to you in selecting literature?
3. How would you describe your selection process?
4. How do you evaluate a piece of literature?
5. What factors would discourage your use of a piece of literature?

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Interviews were conducted at the interviewee's convenience and held at the place of choice for the interviewee. Length of the interviews was restricted to fifteen minutes. The researcher conducted the interviews using the interview questions and a tape recorder. The interviews were promptly transcribed by the researcher.

Scoring. Information from the two instruments used provided the data used in this study. The researcher looked for commonalties among answers in the qualitative data collected. These commonalties formed the basis for categorizing the information collected. Categories for the data included (1) reasons for literature selection, (2)sources of literature selection, (3) common reasons for liking a selection, and (4) common reasons for disliking a selection. The researcher looked for trends among the participants' selection and evaluation behaviors.

Results and Analysis

Quantitative Data. Initial data analysis involved categorizing participant responses to each question of the Literature Selection Survey (LSS). These responses were categorized by sorting participant responses according to apparent similar explanations. The responses were then recorded in the appropriate categories under the corresponding lesson plan. Total responses for each lesson plan and for individual categories were then calculated. Percentage equivalents for total responses to each question are reported in the accompanying pie chart for each of the five questions.

Participant answers to the LSS question, "Why did you pick the literature selection on which you based your lesson plan?," are recorded in Figure 1. These answers indicated that "current teaching topic" (6) and having "heard and liked the text previously" (6) were important factors in the choices of literature by preservice teachers.

Additional categories, "good moral", "illustrations", "questions of students", "own child likes it", "lesson resource", and "vocabulary", received one response each. The responses to the second lesson plan LSS cited "current teaching topic" (3), "book cover" (2), and "importance of topic" (1) as the only deciding factors. The third lesson plan LSS responses included "own child likes it" (4), "current teaching topic" (2), "questions of student" (2), and "confidence building" (2). Single responses of "reading level", "lesson resource", "cute", "student enjoyment", and "prompts discussion" were also recorded Overall (see Figure 1), 23% of the participants cited "current teaching topic" as the reason for their literature selection.. A total of ten responses (5 each in lesson plan #2 and #3) were identified as not applicable or left blank. This represented 21% of the responses to this question. These responses included, however, lesson plans which did not use literature in the course of the lesson. Participants cited "heard it before and liked it" in 12% of the total responses, while 10 % cited "own child likes it".

The LSS question, "Where did you get the selection?", was responded to a total of forty two times. Eight of those responses (19%) were listed as not applicable (see Figure 2). Responses remained fairly consistent across all three lesson plans. Participants reported that in 15 instances (36%) books were obtained from the library. The purchase of books was cited 11 times (26%). Participants reported utilizing literature from home 6 times (14%) and borrowing literature twice (5%).

In 19% (7) of the total responses to the LSS question "What did you like most about it (the literature selection)?" participants cited "story line" (see Figure 3). The category "illustrations" received 16% (6) of the total responses. "Variety of uses" was

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named by participants in 11% (4) of the total responses. Other responses including "cute", "facts", "moral", "supplemental activities", each received 9% (3) of the total.

Participants in the LSS survey responded to the question "What did you like least about it (the literature selection)?" a total of 41 times. No answer or not applicable was cited in 64% (26) of the answers (see Figure 4). "Too long" and "lack of facts" were cited in 8% (3 each) of the total responses. "Pictures", "difficulty of reading aloud", and "events in the book" were each cited by survey participants 5% (2 each) of the time.

The LSS question, "Would you use the selection again?" was answered by 38 participants. Four of the participants (11%) were unsure of future use (see Figure 5). The reason cited for this were "length of the selection" and "loss of student interest". Participants responded that they would use the selection again 86% of the time (33 responses). Reasons given included "effectiveness of literature selection", "learning experiences of students", "enjoyment by students", "illustrations", "message", and "author". Only 3% (1) of the respondents said they would not use the selection again and the reason cited was "the text would not be applicable to his or her future situation".

Qualitative Data. As part of the qualitative analysis, the responses to the question "Why do you choose a piece of literature?" were examined. Three of the five interview participants responded that pictures played a role in their choice of a piece of children's literature. "I choose a piece of literature because of the pictures. I am real hung up on pictures," stated one participant. Another said, "At first impression if it's appealing, the pictures, the cover of the book, the jacket of the book..." Two of the five mentioned choosing literature because of a good message, purpose, or meaning in the text.

Literature was also selected for student enjoyment (2), personal preference (1), recommendation of literature by others (1), and vocabulary presented (1).

The second question in the interview addressed the most appealing factor in selecting literature. Pictures, especially colorful and creative illustrations, were named by in 4 of the 5 interviews conducted as the most appealing factor in literature selection. One participant noted, "If it has some sort of meaning and interesting illustrations and creative illustrations. It's just creative." Each of the interviewees named more than one factor. Additional responses to the question included student enjoyment (2), ease of student reading (2), title of book, meaning, appeal of the literature to students, and author.

Each of the participants also described their selection process. Two of the five participants described it in their answers of the previous question. Four of the five participants interviewed "browsed" libraries, sale tables, and book stores for books looking for books on topic and/ or that were perceived to be interesting. One participant narrowed the selection process to recommendations by others followed by personal review of the literature.

Evaluation of literature was done in several ways by the participants. Two of the participants discussed evaluating a selection on potential for capturing student attention. One of the two specifically mentioned reading the selection to children then evaluating its impact, "Well, I read it to some children and see how it catches their attention. That is a good way to evaluate the book. Then you know how, maybe, some children enjoy the book." Topic and information from the book were named important in literature evaluation by the other participants. One participant mentioned evaluating literature by her child's response to it.

The final question of the interview dealt with the factors which would discourage use of the literature. Three of the five participants stated that length, especially when too long, would discourage their use of literature. Events or story lines which are perceived to be strange or weird (2) were also discussed. A participant particularly noted, "If I thought it was strange or weird. I read this one book at [specific bookstore] and apparently it is a pretty popular book, but I think that it is strange. It's this one that the mother rocks the baby, but I think that it is odd when the mother crawls through the window and rocks him [when he is grown]." Other factors which are discouraging to using a piece of literature include bad beginnings or endings , not interesting or boring, lack of information, negative outlooks, and poor illustrations.

Conclusions

Preservice teachers choose literature for a variety of reasons. However, this study suggests that these reasons may vary as the preservice teacher is increasingly exposed to children's literature and the need for its use in the classroom (Luke, Cooke, & Luke 1986, Jipson & Paley 1991). Interview answers varied from the written LSS answers. This can be partially attributed to the LSS having been filled out in conjunction with a specific lesson plan and its parameters. The data shows a shift from current teaching topic and personal experience playing a distinctive role in literature selection to a more broad based range of selection reasons from the first LSS to the third LSS. It is interesting to note that "current teaching topic" and "having heard it before and liked it" were noticeably absent in the interview format which was conducted as the final step in the data collection process. The changing maturity of the preservice teachers in literature selection is demonstrated by the shift in perspectives.

The factor which was most influential in the selection process was reported to be illustrations by the interviewees. This factor was also mentioned as an influence on selection of literature in the LSS responses, both in the categories of most liked about the literature and the least liked about the literature. The impact of illustrations on preservice teachers (especially elementary preservice teachers) could be attributable to the need to engage or motivate a reader or readers instantly. Preservice teachers are also exposed to a variety of books and award lists of books throughout their preservice training. Award lists such as the Caldecott Awards, are based on the illustrations of the work and children's literature courses in preservice teachers' training explore this realm of books. Many of the preservice teachers take children's literature coursework during the same time as they take the CIE 306 course. This emphasis on visual books could impact the importance of illustrations to preservice teachers. This could be, however, a signal of a disturbing trend to use only books with illustrations which fit the expectations and taste of the preservice teacher. One interviewee stated, " ...it depends on the illustrations.....I like colorful, bright pictures in a book. I don't really care for {certain illustrator and type of illustration}." This type of outlook could lead to very one sided exposure to literature if the preservice teacher is not aware of his or her preference. This indicates that teacher preparation programs should address preservice teacher literature preferences. Awareness of the preference allows the teacher to plan for additional types of literature with or without illustrations in the classroom, thus maintaining student exposure to a variety of literature selections.

Selection process was described by as being characterized by "browsing " libraries, sales tables , and books for material on topic or that were perceived to be of

interest. Answers from the LSS indicated that nearly half of all literature selections by preservice teachers came from the library. Slightly over a fourth were purchased. Libraries thus, play a large role in determining selections that preservice teachers choose to take into the classroom. Library holdings, or lack of holdings, could influence preservice teacher selection. Further research could also tackle the issue of availability of literature by key word searches as a possible influence on the selection process.

Responses to the evaluation of the literature indicate that parameters for literature evaluation change from preservice teacher to preservice teacher. This variance focuses around both aesthetic and instructional values of the literature. Jipson and Paley (1991) observed that experienced teachers tended to both select and evaluate the literature that they choose for classroom use on the same basis. Realizing that teacher response and the perceived instructional value in the classroom are pivotal factors in the evaluation and selection process, teachers (both experienced and preservice) must look carefully at the literature which holds appeal to them and the instructional goals which they are striving to accomplish. This procedure of taking stock can provide the teacher with a better understanding of his or her literature selections. This understanding should be closely weighed with the interests of the students to assure a well rounded literature experience in the classroom.

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Appendix A

Literature Selection Survey

1. Why did you pick the literature selection on which you based your lesson plan?

2. Where did you get the selection?

3. What did you like most about it?

4. What did you like least about it?

5. Would you use it again? Why or why not?

Figure 1. Why did you pick the literature selection on which you based your lesson plan?

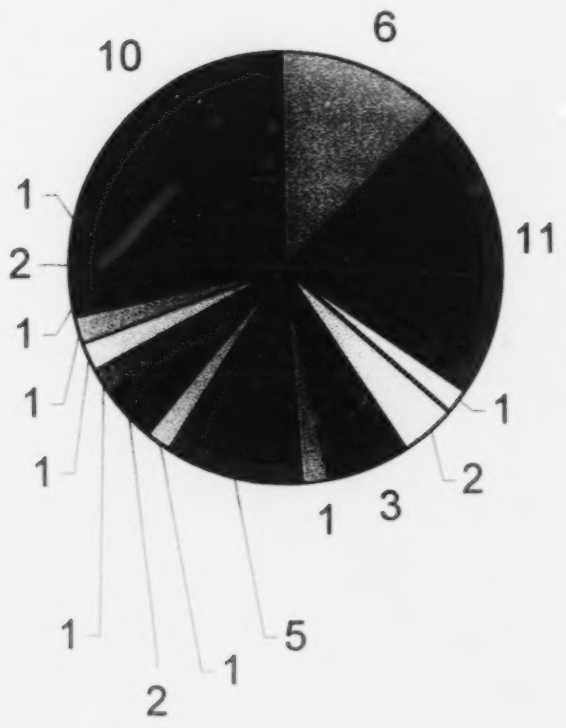

Figure 2. Where did you get the selection?

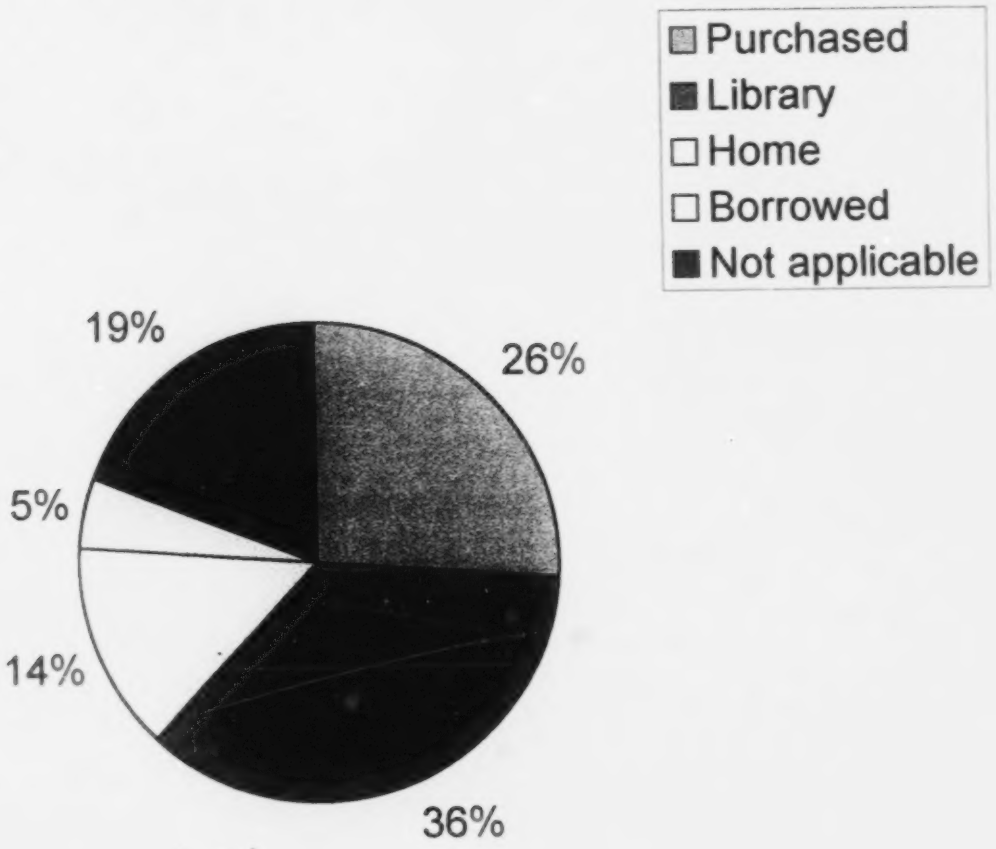

Figure 3. What did you like most about it (the literature selection)?

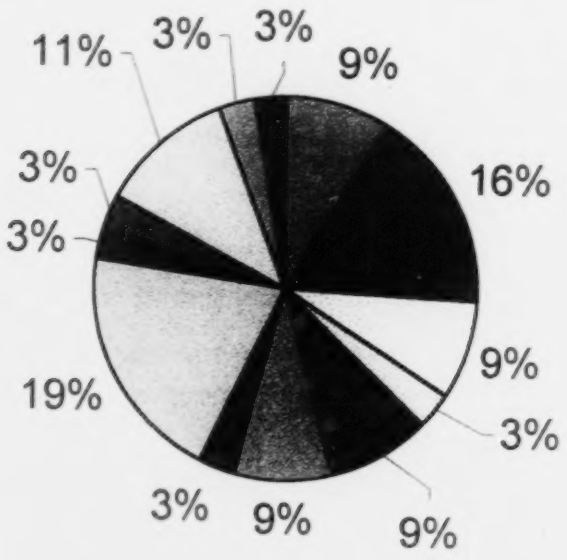

Figure 4. What did you like least about it (the literature selection)?

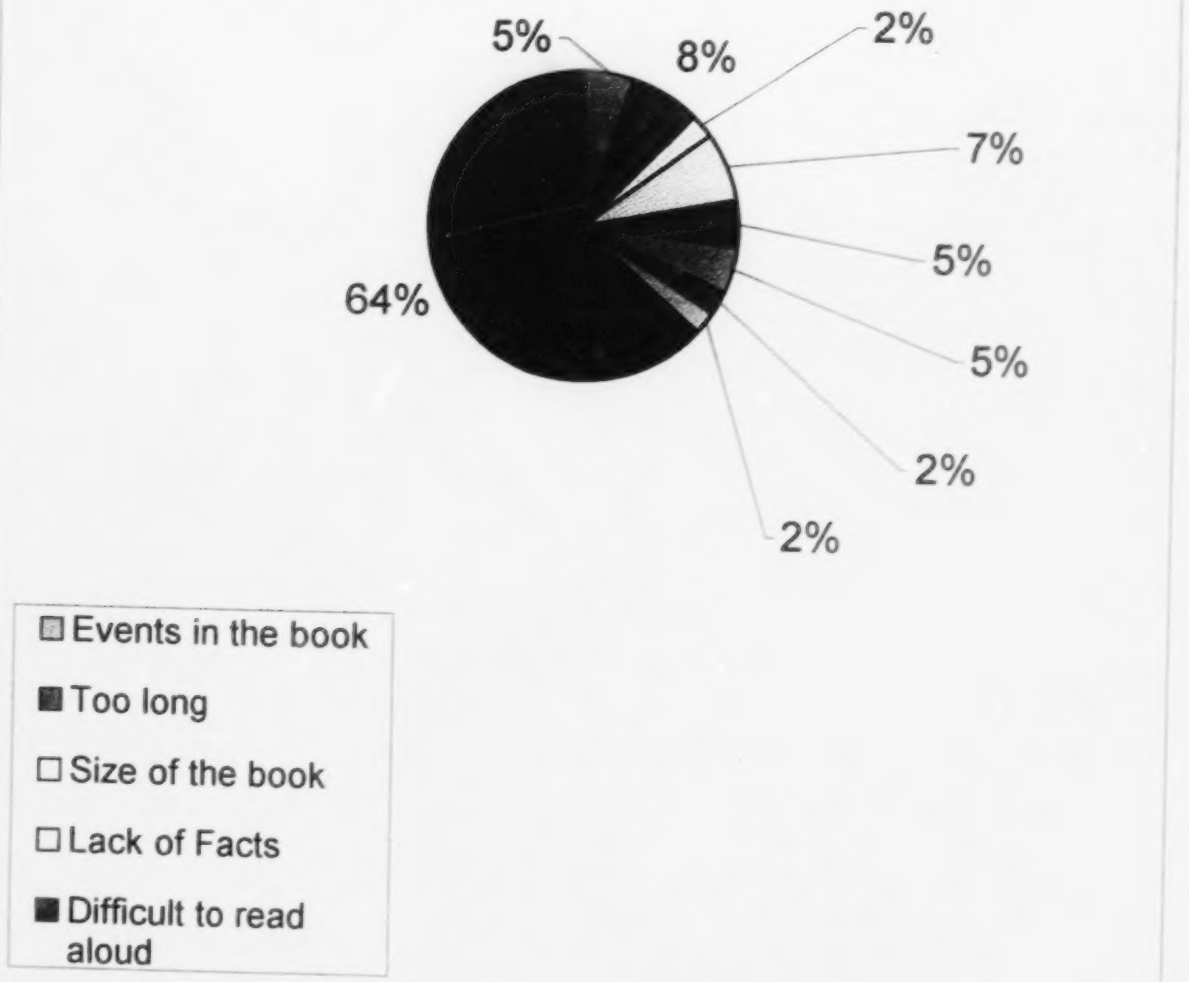

Figure 5. Would you use the selection again?

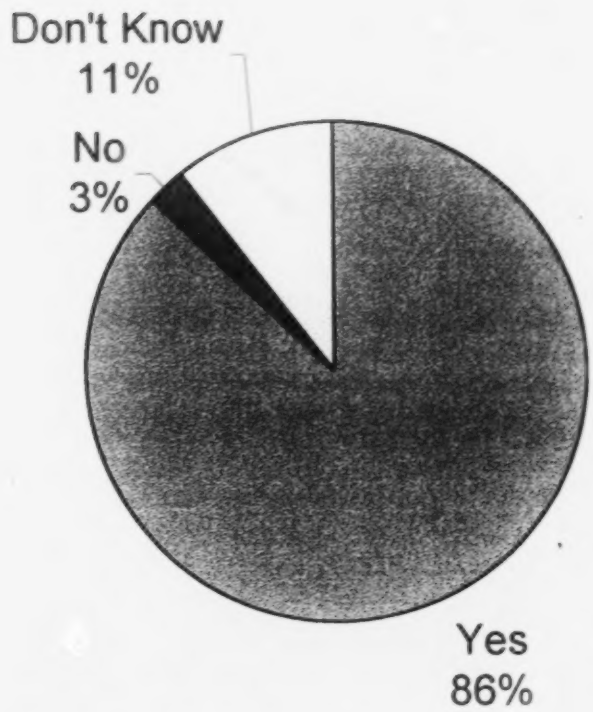

Table 1. Why did you pick the literature selection on which you based your lesson plan?

	L.P.#1	L.P.#2	L.P.#3	Total
Heard before/ liked it	6			6
Current teaching topic	6	3	2	11
Good moral	1			1
Lesson Resource	1		1	2
Illustrations	1		2	3
Questions of students	1			1
Own child likes it	1		4	5
Vocabulary	1			1
Book Cover		2		2
Importance of topic		1		1
Cute			1	1
Reading level			1	1
Student enjoyment			1	1
Confidence building			2	2
Prompts discussion			1	1
Not applicable/ blank		5	5	10
Response Totals	18	11	20	49